Philosophy of Teaching and Learning

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Summary

I have spent enough time on the receiving end of a lesson to know how to be a good student and succeed academically; it is an entirely different perspective being to be the one facilitating students growth. Based on my experience as both a student, and an intern I have developed a philosophy of teaching and learning that uses project-based learning as a foundation to make knowledge memorable and meaningful, accommodate the different learning needs of students, as well as to promote collaboration amongst students in the classroom. The purpose of the following summary is to articulate a brief overview of my teaching philosophy.

Upon reflecting on my own experiences in a classroom as both a student and an educator I quickly realized that the most meaningful learning opportunities that I have had, were those that challenged to study a particular topic in depth. For this reason I chose to articulate my philosophy using an umbrella as a metaphor to illustrate how project-base learning (the over-arching theme) can simultaneously foster students imagination, accommodate their various intelligences, create collaborative teams while maintaining an inquiry-based approach to learning. Project-based learning has the unique power of constructively piecing together a wide range of skills to create a positive learning environment where all students can succeed and grow.

While many scholars such as Lev Vigotsky, Peter Doolittle, Alfie Kohn and Mark Prensky offer invaluable perspective on educational pedagogy, Kieran Egan’s imaginative education philosophy truly resonates with me, as I am keen to embodying his positive and engaging views that imagination and creativity should play an active role in the classroom. The notion that people, notably Sir Ken Robinson, believe that school kills creativity, is troubling because imagination and creativity should be central features of elementary education. There are numerous ways we can integrate and promote students critical thinking skills, and ask them to think outside the box, but as teachers we have to be willing to do the same.

In conclusion I believe students should be actively involved in their learning and through project-based learning elementary students can develop their imaginative and teamwork skill, as well has gain necessary knowledge that is meaningful and memorable to them. Learning doesn’t have to be as a desk with a piece of paper and a pen- it can and should be interactive, student-centered and inquiry-based.

Introduction

 Education is one of the most valuable tools a person can acquire, and the educators whom foster student leaning are under immense pressure to ensure that children receive the essential learnings to allow them to be successful in life. While administrators, parents, teachers and children all hold unique views on the teaching and learning process, the purpose of the following paper is to articulate my personal philosophy of teaching and learning from the perspective of a pre-service teacher. Throughout this paper I will explain how I will use project-based learning as an over-arching theme in my elementary classroom to effectively, make learning memorable and meaningful, accommodate the different learning needs of students, as well as to promote collaboration.

**Project-based learning**

 Since becoming an educator I have realized that I see the role of teachers dramatically differently than I did as a student; for example as a student I strongly believed that students who fail to submit an assignment on time should be penalized, and even receive a zero if necessary, but as a teacher, I don't see how this practice will benefit the students’ overall learning to any degree. There is a common belief that is shared within the current public school system that states that no student should ever feel defeated or unsuccessful. Although there are many strategies to ensure that all teachers create a positive learning environment, frequently assesses students’ knowledge and that uncovering their schemes and interests, should play an active role in how the class is structured. As a new teacher, something that I will constantly asking be myself is how can I, a single person, teach the same or similar outcomes at twenty different levels? After discussing this question with several teachers, reading various scholarly articles about pedagogy, combined with my internship experience, I have concluded that project-based learning will be the foundation of my teaching and learning philosophy. Through project-based learning the classroom can be scaffolded and structured in such a way that all students can continuously be learning while being challenged at their respective level; this parallel’s Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which is the region between what students already know, and what they can learn with guidance (Woolfolk, Winnie & Perry, 2006, p. 47).

Like Vygotsky and many other educational psychologist I strongly believe that learning is an active process for all individuals- students and teachers alike- but student learning has been proven to increase when it reflects authentic and real-world experiences (Kaldi, Filippatou & Govaris, 2011, p. 36). At the elementary level, students tend to rely more heavily on their teachers for guidance, but through project-based learning, teachers can slowly step back and challenge students ZPD and allow them to construct their own knowledge and learn from one another. There are many skills that are developed through project-based learning, and many of the positive impacts and benefits of this approach will be revealed throughout this paper.

**Imagination and Creativity**

During my first seven-week field placement I added a new dimension to the morning routine, when I incorporated a daily riddle to the morning message. At the time, I thought this was merely an engaging activity to involve students and get them thinking critically first thing in the morning. Although I found this new routine to be a productive use of class time, it was not until reading and learning about Kieran Egan’s philosophy of imaginative learning that I truly understood why students enjoyed this activity every morning. According to Egan, students have cognitively separated learning from humour, so they are often caught off-guard and surprised when a teacher choses to consciously make humour the center of learning (Egan, 2005, p. 26). Humour, whether it be in the form of jokes or riddles, can enhance learning and be used as a tool to grab students’ attention before the real work begins (Egan, 2005, p.25). Why should teacher suppress students’ creativity and imagination in the classroom? Like Egan, I believe that incorporating this dimension to everyday teaching is essential and an integral part of making learning memorable and meaningful for students. Imaginative education fits nicely under the umbrella of project-based learning as one of the foundations of this approach to teaching is learning in depth. Although many educators are not familiar with this form of enrichment, it can be incorporated in various ways and for any amount of time, but essentially, learning in depth means that students (or a class) choose a topic to study for an extended period of time- Egan goes as far as to suggest students study a topic in depth from kindergarten through to grade twelve which is an extreme version- but it is up to the teacher how long this enrichment project extends. The intention of this pedagogy is that students will explore a single topic from many different perspective and will enrich their knowledge, imagination, creativity and critical thinking skills in the process. I was lucky to experience a version of learning in depth first hand, during my internship; the class chose ‘Birds and Bugs’ as a topic to study rigorously throughout the year. After seeing this form thematic project-based learning in action, I strongly believe that there are many fundamental skills that are developed when of project-based learning and imagination are combined.

Albert Einstein’s quote “Logic will get your form A to Z; imagination will get you everywhere” conveys a very strong message which suggests that no matter how much a teacher tries to engrain knowledge into students brains, children will only truly develop intellectually if there is an emphasis on thinking outside the box: “We [society] value imagination largely for its connection with individuality, originality, freedom, and authentic self-expression, qualities which are fundamental in modern societies” (Egan, 2007, p. 113). Many people often overlook the fact that many inventions have been discovered by average people like Thomas Newcomen who was merely a factory worker when he developed the first practical steam engine, and Mark Zuckerberg who was a student when he invented Facebook (Vygotsky, 2004). As a final remark on this topic, I would like to emphasize that although it is important for teachers to facilitate creative growth amongst the students it is equally important that model this behaviour in their everyday teaching. Who says that a lesson can’t be told in the form of a narrative?

**Multiple Intelligences**

 Thus far I have argued that through project-based learning students imaginative skills can be nurtured and developed, the second benefit to this teaching approach is that it welcomes the construction of an environment that allows learning to take place in a framework tailored to the intellectual strengths of all students (Doolittle, 1999, p. 5). Although Howard Gardner did not intend for his theory of multiple intelligences to be applied to education, I intend to use the general notion of his theory- that people have different biological strengths- as a guideline to ensure that I incorporate as many different teaching and assessment tools so all students equal opportunity to learn. (Dodge, 2005, 18). Project-based learning is among the most diverse teaching strategies that naturally accommodates and incorporates multiple leaning styles into the learning process as they have the freedom to choose assignments and projects that allow them feel most successful. The ultimate goal of education is that students are continuously building upon their prior knowledge; this does not inherently mean that they must all gain knowledge in the same way. Though some scholars have criticized the application of Gardner’s theory in the field of education, claiming that students will be labeled as being linguistic, mathematical, special, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal or naturalist, I think that what is most important to take away from Gardner’s theory is that we all learn best in different ways- if you are a tactile learner you shouldn’t be forced to constantly be the chameleon to be an auditory learner (Dodge, 2005, p. 89). While Jerome Bruner is commonly referenced for emphasizing collaboration in the classroom, he also reinforces the notion that teachers can no longer stand in front of a chalkboard and dictate the “right” answer: “We humans show, tell, or teach someone something only because we first recognize that they don’t know, or what they believe is false” (Bruner, 1996, 48). It is human nature to correct others and relay our knowledge as an “expert” as Piaget, would say, but as an elementary teacher it is important embody Vygotsky’s approach and merely guide students through a process of self-discovery (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Collaboration**

 As I mentioned previously, my views of teaching and learning are radically different when I look at a situation from the perspective of a student and a teacher, and collaboration and group work is certainly among those topics. I am haunted to this day of the fifth grade Social Studies project that my partner had to re-do after the teacher found out that I did the entire project; this is a common experience in all group work scenarios. I entered the Bachelor of Education program I swore that I would never put my students through similar group work scenarios but it is incredible how quickly I have changed by stance on this topic. I now view collaboration and group work as a life skill that should be introduced in elementary school, to construct a learning environment in the classroom rich in peer-teaching, and group problem solving.

**Motivation**

The final component of my teaching philosophy I am going to address is with regards to motivation: how do you motivate students? Most teachers would be quick to say that you need to make learning fun while other would say through bribery and rewards; my answer to this question is that you inspire students creativity and imagination, you make learning meaningful and relevant, and most important you make it inquiry-based. One way that I successful motivated students during my internship was by integrating technology into the classroom. Simple innovative changes in teaching such as integrating technology into a project can result in a surge of motivation to learn on behalf of the students. Although I do not entirely agree with Alfie Kohn’s belief that no rewards or punishments should be given to students, he makes an excellent argument when he states that teachers should focus less on how to react when a challenging situation arises and focus more on how to create an environment where misbehaviour seldom occurs (Kohn, 1996, p. 121). To conclude this section I would simply like to add that although motivation is an internal drive to obtain a goal, it is strongly linked to the learning environment in the classroom and how the teacher chooses to introduce a topic.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion my philosophy of teaching and learning has a strong focus on creating a positive learning atmosphere where all students feel welcome and capable of succeeding. To achieve this inclusive, student-centered learning environment I have emphasized how using project-based learning can achieve multiple outcomes, which facilitate students’ academic growth and development. I believe that by having students actively involved in their learning they will inadvertently develop their imaginative and teamwork skills as well has gain valuable knowledge that is meaningful and memorable to them. Learning doesn’t have to be as a desk with a piece of paper and a pen- it can, and should be, interactive, student-centered and inquiry-based.

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